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United States Department of Agriculture,

DIVISION OF BIOLOGICAL SURVEY.

BIRD DAY IN THE SCHOOLS.

The observance of Arbor Day by the schools has been so successful that it has been suggested that a Bird Day, to be devoted to instructing the children in the value of our native birds and the best means of protecting them, might with propriety be added to the school calendar. The idea of setting apart one day in the year for the planting of trees was first suggested nearly twenty-five years ago by the Hon. J. Sterling Morton, now Secretary of Agriculture. More than a million trees were planted on the first Arbor Day, and the importance of the day has gradually increased until it has come to be observed in nearly every State and Territory in the Union. One of the greatest benefits of Arbor Day is the sentiment and interest aroused in the subject of trees and in the broader study of nature. It is believed that the observance of a Bird Day would appeal to our people—particularly our youth—even more strongly.

HISTORY OF BIRD DAY.

Bird Day is more than a suggestion. It has been already adopted in at least two cities with marked success, but as yet it is still an experiment. Apparently the idea originated with Prof. C. A. Babcock, superintendent of schools in Oil City, Pa., who wrote to the Department of Agriculture in 1894 urging the establishment of such a day, and stating that May 4 would be observed as Bird Day in Oil City. In reply, the Secretary of Agriculture sent the following letter:

WASHINGTON, D. C., *April 23, 1894.*

MR. C. A. BABCOCK,

Superintendent of Schools, Oil City, Pa.

DEAR SIR: Your proposition to establish a "Bird Day" on the same general plan as "Arbor Day" has my cordial approval.

Such a movement can hardly fail to promote the development of a healthy public sentiment toward our native birds, favoring their preservation and increase. If directed toward this end, and not to the encouragement of the importation of foreign species, it is sure to meet the approval of the American people.

It is a melancholy fact that among the enemies of our birds two of the most destructive and relentless are our women and our boys. The love of feather ornamentation so heartlessly persisted in by thousands of women, and the mania for collecting eggs and killing birds so deeply rooted in our boys, are legacies of barbarism inherited from our savage ancestry. The number of beautiful and useful birds annually slaughtered for bonnet trimmings runs up into the hundreds of thousands and threatens, if it has not already accomplished, the extermination of some of the rarer species. The insidious egg-hunting and pea-shooting proclivities of the small boy are hardly less widespread and destructive. It matters little which of the two agencies is the more fatal since neither is productive of any good. One looks to the gratification of a shallow vanity, the other to the gratification of a cruel instinct and an expenditure of boyish energy that might be profitably diverted into other channels. The evil is one against which legislation can be only palliative and of local efficiency. Public sentiment, on the other hand, if properly fostered in the schools, would gain force with the growth and development of our boys and girls and would become a hundredfold more potent than any law enacted by the State or Congress. I believe such a sentiment can be developed, so strong and so universal, that a respectable woman will be ashamed to be seen with the wing of a wild bird on her bonnet, and an honest boy will be ashamed to own that he ever robbed a nest or wantonly took the life of a bird.

Birds are of inestimable value to mankind. Without their unremitting services our gardens and fields would be laid waste by insect pests. But we owe them a greater debt even than this, for the study of birds tends to develop some

of the best attributes and impulses of our natures. Among them we find examples of generosity, unselfish devotion, of the love of mother for offspring and other estimable qualities. Their industry, patience, and ingenuity excite our admiration ; their songs inspire us with a love of music and poetry ; their beautiful plumages and graceful manners appeal to our esthetic sense ; their long migrations to distant lands stimulate our imaginations and tempt us to inquire into the causes of these periodic movements, and finally, the endless modifications of form and habits by which they are enabled to live under most diverse conditions of food and climate—on land and at sea—invite the student of nature into inexhaustible fields of pleasurable research.

The cause of bird protection is one that appeals to the best side of our natures. Let us yield to the appeal. Let us have a Bird Day—a day set apart from all the other days of the year to tell the children about the birds. But we must not stop here. We should strive continually to develop and intensify the sentiment of bird protection, not alone for the sake of preserving the birds, but also for the sake of replacing as far as possible the barbaric impulses inherent in child nature by the nobler impulses and aspirations that should characterize advanced civilization.

Respectfully,

J. STERLING MORTON,
Secretary of Agriculture.

Of the success of this first experiment there can be no question. "The day was observed in the Oil City schools with a degree of enthusiasm which was good to see. The amount of information about birds that was collected by the children was simply amazing. Original compositions were read, informal discussions were held, talks by teachers were given, and the birds in literature were not forgotten or overlooked. * * * The idea simply needs to be known to meet with a warm welcome akin to that with which we greet our first robin or song sparrow in the spring.—(Journal of Education, May 24, 1894.)

Bird Day was observed in 1895 and again on May 8, 1896, with such success that it bids fair to become a regular feature of the schools in Oil City at least. In speaking of the third anniversary, Superintendent Babcock says :

The exercises this year (1896), as upon previous ones, varied somewhat in the different grades. They consisted of original compositions by the pupils, containing the results of their observations of birds, of talks by pupils and teachers, comparing observations, giving localities of bird haunts, and general exchange of bird lore ; of recitations from eminent prose writers on birds, and from the poets ; finally many of our schools closed their exercises by a trip to the woods to listen to the vesper concert of our feathered brothers. * * * We begin the study of birds on January 1 and continue till June, studying those that stay all winter and trying to keep account of the new comers as they arrive. We devote two periods, of twenty minutes each, per week to this study. Bird Day is a summary or focusing of the work of the year. * * * The results of bird study and of Bird Day are interesting. Our children generally know most of our bird residents, they also love them, and feel like protecting them. There has been a complete change in the relations existing between the small boy and the birds.

Other suggestions regarding the study of birds and the observance of the day will be found in two interesting articles on Bird Day, one by Superintendent Babcock, in the Journal of Education for April 4, 1895 ; the other by A. E. Winship, in the Outlook for April 6, 1895, p. 560.

Last spring (1896) the movement was started in Iowa by Prof. C. H. Morrill, superintendent of schools at Fort Madison, who was apparently unaware of the experiment in Pennsylvania. He set apart May 29, 1896, as Bird Day in the schools under his jurisdiction, and describes the result as follows :

I never saw children more enthusiastic in preparation or happier in rendering. They brought their pet birds, they decorated the rooms with flowers and green branches, they ornamented the boards with drawings of birds, birds' nests, flowers, etc. * * * The buildings rang with bird music all day, the children were happier than ever before and visitors came until standing space in many rooms was at a premium. * * * It is safe to say that we shall celebrate the day next year. I hope it may come to be a national day.

The Department has also received inquiries concerning Bird Day from Connecticut, and the matter is attracting attention in Nebraska. Professor Lawrence Bruner in his "Notes on the Birds of Nebraska," published in May, 1896, says :

It might be well to suggest that the subject [of ornithology] is of sufficient importance to call for its being taught in our public schools, to a limited extent at least. We should have a "Bird Day" just as we have an "Arbor Day" and a "Flag Day," when suitable exercises should be held commemorative of the occasion.

OBJECT OF BIRD DAY.

From all sides come reports of a decrease in native birds due to the clearing of the forests, draining of the swamps and cultivation of land, but especially to the increasing slaughter of birds for game, the demand for feathers to supply the millinery trade, and the breaking up of nests to gratify the egg-collecting proclivities of small boys. An attempt has been made to restrict these latter causes by legislation. Nearly every State and Territory has passed game laws, and several States have statutes protecting insectivorous birds. Such laws are frequently changed and can not be expected to accomplish much unless supported by popular sentiment in favor of bird protection. This object can only be attained by demonstrating to the people the value of birds, and how can it be accomplished better than through the medium of the schools?

Briefly stated, the object of Bird Day is to diffuse knowledge concerning our native birds and to arouse a more general interest in bird protection. As such it should appeal not only to ornithologists, sportsmen, and farmers, who have a practical interest in the preservation of birds, but also the general public who would soon appreciate the loss if the common songsters were exterminated.

It is time to give more intelligent attention to the birds and appreciate their value. Many schools already have courses in natural history or nature study, and such a day would add zest to the regular studies, encourage the pupils to observe carefully, and give them something to look forward to and work for. In the words of the originator of the day, "the general observance of a Bird Day in our schools would probably do more to open thousands of young minds to the reception of bird lore than anything else that can be devised." The first thing is to interest the scholars in birds in general and particularly in those of their own locality. Good lists of birds have been prepared for several of the States, and popular books and articles on ornithology are within the reach of everyone. But the instruction should not be limited to books; the children should be encouraged to observe the birds in the field, to study their habits and migrations, their nests and food, and should be taught to respect the laws protecting game and song birds.

VALUE OF BIRD DAY.

When the question of introducing Arbor Day into the schools was brought before the National Educational Association in February, 1884, the objection was made that the subject was out of place in the schools. The value of the innovation could not be appreciated by those who did not see the practical bearing of the subject on an ordinary school course. But at the next meeting of the Association the question was again brought up and unanimously adopted—to the mutual benefit of the schools and of practical forestry. With the advent of more progressive ideas concerning education there is a demand for instruction in subjects which a few years ago would have been considered out of place, or of no special value. If the main object of our educational system is to prepare boys and girls for the intelligent performance of the duties and labors of life, why should not some attention be given to the study of nature, particularly in rural schools where the farmers of the next generation are now being educated?

The study of birds may be taken up in several ways and for different purposes; it may be made to furnish simply a course in mental training or to assist the pupil in acquiring habits of accurate observation; it may be taken up alone or combined with composition, drawing, geography, or literature. But it has also an economic side which may appeal to those who demand purely practical studies in schools.

Economic ornithology has been defined as the "study of birds from the standpoint of dollars and cents." It treats of the direct relations of birds to man, showing which species are beneficial and which injurious, teaching the agriculturist how to protect his feathered friends and guard against the attacks of his foes. This is a subject in which we are only just beginning to acquire exact knowledge, but it is none the less deserving of a place in our educational system on this account. Its practical value is recognized both by individual States and by the National Government, which appropriate considerable sums of money for investigations of value to agriculture. Much good work has been done by some of the experiment stations and State boards of agriculture, particularly in Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania. In the United States Department of Agriculture, the Division of Biological Survey (formerly the Division of Ornithology) devotes much attention to the collection of data respecting the geographic distribution, migration, and food of birds, and to the publication and diffusion of information concerning species which are beneficial or injurious to agriculture. Some of the results of these investigations are of general interest, and could be used in courses of instruction in even the lower schools. Such facts would thus reach a larger number of persons than is now possible, and would be made more generally available to those interested in them.

If illustrations of the practical value of a knowledge of zoology are necessary they can easily be given. It has been estimated recently that the forests and streams of Maine are worth more than its agricultural resources. If this is so, is it not equally as important to teach the best means of preserving the timber, the game, and the fish, as it is to teach students how to develop the agricultural wealth of the State? In 1885 Pennsylvania passed its famous "scalp act," and in less than two years expended between \$75,000 and \$100,000 in an attempt to rid the State of animals and birds supposed to be injurious. A large part of the money was spent for killing hawks and owls, most of which belonged to species which were afterwards shown to be actually beneficial. Not only was money thrown away in a useless war against noxious animals, but the State actually paid for the destruction of birds of inestimable value to its farmers. During the last five or six years two States have been engaged in an unsuccessful attempt to exterminate English sparrows by paying bounties for their heads. Michigan and Illinois have each spent more than \$50,000, but, although millions of sparrows have been killed, the decrease in numbers is hardly perceptible. A more general knowledge of the habits of the English sparrow at the time the bird was first introduced into the United States would not only have saved this outlay of over \$100,000, but would also have saved many other States from loss due to depredations by sparrows.

Is it not worth while to do something to protect the birds and prevent their destruction before it is too late? A powerful influence for good can be exerted by the schools if the teachers will only interest themselves in the movement, and the benefit that will result to the pupils could hardly be attained in any other way at so small an expenditure of time. If it is deemed unwise to establish another holiday, or it may seem too much to devote one day in the year to the study of birds, the exercises of Bird Day might be combined with those of Arbor Day.

It is believed that Bird Day can be adopted with profit by schools of all grades, and the subject is recommended to the thoughtful attention of teachers and school superintendents throughout the country, in the hope that they will cooperate with other agencies now at work to prevent the destruction of our native birds.

T. S. PALMER,
Acting Chief of Division.

Approved:

CHAS. W. DABNEY, Jr.,

WASHINGTON, D. C., *July 2, 1896.*